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ABSTRACT

The values and progress of the middle school movement are examined in this speech. The impact of the recent emphasis on basic skills and conventional instructional methods on the middle school concept of humanistic education is explored. The author foresees either a frightening, Orwellian future for middle school education in which adolescents are channeled into conformity and obedience, or a positive, humanistic future in which adolescents are given the opportunity to practice democratic values and to develop the abilities for fulfilling their individual potential. She maintains that the decisions made now concerning resources for curriculum and educational programs will determine which future awaits the middle school. (DS)

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The Middle School: 1984 or 2001?

Speech delivered at the National Middle School Association Conference, November 4, 1977.

Nancy M. Doda

Nancy M. Doda
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
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I. INTRODUCTION

I'd like to tell you about a school. It's a school of incredible order and efficiency. Time is never wasted on making decisions or resolving problems because in this school decisions are already made and all problems are presolved. No time is ever devoted to building cooperative and caring relationships because there's more important business at hand. It's a school that strives to prepare students for life in a society; its ultimate goals are obedience, conformity and acceptance. Personal freedom and thought have been eliminated for their inconvenience. The teachers here never worry because they are told what to teach, how to teach and when to teach. It's simple: following directions; yields success; deviation breeds failure. The same is true for the students who are amazingly docile, authority-fearing and fanatical in their desire to be conventional and correct. They strive for sameness.

Most teachers and students in the school have grown content to survive; most never wonder how it might be different; they do not resist. From time to time, the children forget the rules of the school but are persuaded to reform and they do. There are teachers and administrators too, who secretly wonder but here none can be trusted and so they wonder alone.

This is the school of 1984. A school in a society that George Orwell imagined some time ago, where the last man, the last flicker of individual freedom and the last ounce of humanity are stomped out. Orwell's picture of tomorrow's school is frightening but as a statement of warning I believe it holds much meaning for us as educators today. How many of the 4,000 middle schools in America are on the threshold of a 1984?

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In the last ten years the middle school has made tremendous progress in revitalizing the educational experiences for emerging adolescents. From very few in the early 1960's to some 4,000 or more in 1977, the middle school now holds a permanent place as an educational institution in America. Its growth however is not only in number, for we can witness with pride the changing programs and practices brought forth by the enthusiastic commitment and hard work that has characterized the entire movement. Individualizing and exploration, as goals upheld to be met, have been realized in some fashion in many middle schools across the country. Team teaching and the interdisciplinary team model have become more and more popular as schools reorganize their programs for the unique youngsters we call transescents. Indeed, affective education seen in small-group guidance or homebase classes has found a place in many middle schools, in many states. Even the difficult to establish middle school teacher education programs are growing in quantity and quality. For all of these accomplishments and for our spreading national recognition and continued growth, we can be proud; we should be proud for it is pride that will give us the needed strength to forge ahead.

In 1977, the first full year in the 3rd century of our nation's history, we face a period of new beginnings as we leave behind the celebrated or not so celebrated bicentennial memory and begin our journey toward our nation's tricentennial. It is a time of uncertain changes such as our new political leader, the traumatic energy crisis, the advent of the space shuttle as well as ever-present social evolutions which are constant reminders that many imagined worlds of tomorrow are here with us today.

I am uncertain as we all are on the exact number of quality middle schools which are truly humanizing the educational experiences of our children, but I am more uncertain in this time of change, as to the number of middle schools today that are emerging models of the healthy and life-giving society we long to achieve for tomorrow. Someday, facts and figures may tell the truth concerning our real growth as a viable

movement in American education, but I cannot wait until then. I feel a sense of urgency to look now at what is happening in our middle schools in a personal effort to offer priorities for the future survival of the American School in the middle.

II. CRITIQUE: WHERE WE ARE GOING?

For a decade or more we have expressed dedication to the task of humanizing education for those "Forgotten Years". We have spoken with conviction from our movement's beginnings, at our national conferences and elsewhere throughout the nation that the middle school should be an ever-emerging, ever-changing institution, especially opening and innovative and continually capable of adapting to the momentum and change of adolescence. We have declared allegiance to life-long learning, individual growth and flexible curriculum. What frightens me though is that our rhetoric is reaching forward toward more humane and fully functioning middle schools, while our programs and practices are pulling back weakening under the suppressive cries for basics and accountability.

I find the scramble to define and defend the basics disillusioning. Though we have given years of LIP service to diversity and individuality, I walk through schools and hear troubled voices that call for more conformity, more standardization and more control, and though I sympathize, I wonder, is the authentic message of the American middle school one which encourages the growth of unique individuals or one which works to produce a silent majority? Are we encouraging students to participate actively in their lives in society now and in the future?

Schools are digging up corpse-like curriculum guides to be reworded, recoded and reused in classrooms to insure school wide accountability. The textbook market has increased significantly as middle schools again look for reliable and standard tools for accountable teaching and learning. In some schools, teachers are even found teaching the test as a desperate means of achieving credibility. Assuredly, preparing relevant curriculum and instruction with this back to basics thrust presents considerable challenge.

Our panic to teach the 3R's has increasing numbers of us pre-occupied with order and control, reluctant to turn teachers and children free to question, experiment and explore. Schedules have adopted additional lines as time is carefully divided and rationed. At 9 o'clock we study Spelling; at 10 o'clock we study Math because Spelling is over. Johnny may still need more time to learn his words but it's time to move on. And though I have long been an advocate of individualized instruction and still am, I am fearful that most of our experiments with individualizing still define it in the narrowest terms: Each child is free to go more or less rapidly where he is told to go.

The children in our schools are not only different in the amount of time they need to learn, they are different by what they think and feel, by their wildest imaginings and by their very personal talents and skills. Can we honestly say we are encouraging the growth of individual minds and spirits?

What are middle school kids doing in our classrooms across the country? If you ask them, far too many will tell you that most of their time is spent in their seats, listening to the teacher and doing assigned work. It seems to me that in 1977 our students are still expected to spend most of 6 hours a day as docile recipients of wisdom, behaving passively as empty vessels to be filled. It seems many are not thinking because we're not asking them to think. They're passive because we don't invite them to be otherwise.

Notable opportunities for self-discovery are slowly but surely being consumed by additional school day hours devoted to the 3R's. Special interest or exploratory programs which were for most kids and (some teachers), their only school thrills, are gradually excluded as only school frills. Sadly, even the tremendous acceleration towards affective education is losing speed and vigor as small-group guidance, homebase or advisor-advisee programs are reduced to the organizational convenience of the old homeroom.

As these programs begin to dissolve, ability grouping coupled with new school rules become necessary as teachers struggle to teach the prescribed curriculum and still maintain discipline in schools with unhappy kids.

In our retreat, there is another perhaps more human dimension which is equally powerful in its capacity to undermine our humanizing efforts. In these times of hand-me-down pressure, we naturally seek, above all, individual survival. The principal takes hold of the school, the teacher takes hold of the classroom and the resulting human community is one of coexistence, not cooperation, one of power-holding, not power-sharing; one of distance not closeness. The ultimate humanness of a community, it seems to me, is based on a shared faith in all of its members as responsible contributors and on a shared commitment to the welfare of that community.

True social cooperation, with extensive human involvement and dialogue, is a goal we have yet to realize, for across the country a sense of distrust and distance still characterizes even the most spirited middle school communities. Principals, whose school boards and superintendents may demonstrate little faith in them, feel unable to delegate responsibility to teachers. Teachers then show little faith in their colleagues and less in their students. And our students who are frequently thwarted from opportunities to share in dialogue and decision-making are finding that school is not a place where what they have to say really counts.

Teachers are encouraged to be committed and responsible professionals but after signing in each day, how many are ever consulted about those things which concern them most, such as curriculum relevance, textbook selection, school policy? How many middle schools are taking the time for such vital human dialogue and cooperative-decision making?

Continually we say and hear "kids aren't responsible", but how often are students asked individually or collectively, "What do you think should be done", or how often are they allowed to be responsible in any significant way?

If middle schools do not become communities where individuals are prized through mutual human regard and shared responsibility, will we have done enough to prepare for the future? Will our middle school children know how to join heads and hearts in building humane society we need for tomorrow?

III. 2001: A LOOK AHEAD

I have shared with you a school that frightens me, one that imposes warning, and one that we must resist. I would like to tell you about another school for unlike the school of 1984, it is a school of vision.

In this school every program, policy and practice is designed especially for adolescent learners, so the school is a close human community where time is devoted to caring, sharing and relating. As you walk through the halls, you see kids teaching kids, teachers helping teachers and administrators helping both. It is truly a community of teaching and learning.

Teachers and students work hard to resolve problems and plan learning so that the ideas, opinions and rights of everyone involved are always considered. It's a school of democratic freedom but it's also a school of democratic responsibility, and teachers, administrators and students are committed to upholding decisions they make, hand in hand.

The school strives to prepare students for living actively and participating thoughtfully in their lives now and in the future. They are encouraged to work hard at learning; seeking competence. They are encouraged to explore, question and wonder. They are encouraged to think, feel and value. They are encouraged to live.

Ultimately, the school strives to help its students become life-long learners who prize learning as a process of living, discovering what it means to be human and what it means to live life fully.

This is the school of 2001. What is it we must do to resist the threat of a 1984, and begin an odyssey to the promise of 2001?

As we look ahead to our life-time investments of teaching or working in the middle school, I would like to invite you to share a creed which I believe should direct our energies and efforts as we struggle to move forward against the tides of our time. It is that as professional educators we will stop responding to the challenges of the present and future as if we didn't have the answers and begin with courage to put the answers we have into action. As Erik Erikson believed" . . . The Greatest Tragedy In American Education Is That We Ignore What We Know To Be True,"

I am convinced that we have many answers but our success in building the middle school we need depends on our capacity to activate resources and bravely defend our answers in actions.

Without question the middle school must accept the challenge to improve the basic skills of this country's children. Today, there are thousands of Americans who lack the basic skills to survive the common grocery store dilemma, and it has been predicted that " . . . Achievement Test Results Of 13-Year Olds Will Decline By 1981, If Present Trends In Our Schools And Society Continue". No wonder the public is crying out. There's reason to be concerned. It seems to me though that our response to the basics has been shallow, rooted more in panic and fear and less in what we know about adolescence and learning. As I see it, a different strategy is needed if we are to avoid replacing our most profound educational goals with the single goal of "catching up".

Middle school students are astounding in their ever-present hunger for discovery. They are alive with curiosity and questioning, eager to find out who they are and who they can become in a world which tells them neither. It shouldn't surprise us then that their skill achievement is highly correlated with increased opportunities to explore, experiment and experience. In a phrase, for the kids we serve, the more frills the more skills. Recent studies indicate that there is a remarkable link between the arts and learning and between experimental curriculum and academic growth. One school that recently adopted an arts, exploratory curriculum found the number of 6th Graders reading on or above grade level increased six-fold in one school year. Yet in cities across the Nation the arts and exploratory classes are among the first to go. If our middle schools are to be places where significant learning occurs, we must erase the lines we've drawn between the enriched curriculum and real learning and find ways to make those two one in the same. Exploratory curriculum with music, art and all that constitutes aesthetic education must be reinstated in our middle schools if we are to meet the challenge of the basics as informed educators.

The results of a nationwide poll on school problems lists discipline along with basic skills as a top concern of administrators, teachers and parents. The entire Nation is wondering, "What's happening with our kids?" As educators who must have effective school discipline to survive, we are pressured to use the speed and expediency found in intimidation, authority and power rather than encouraged to search for a means to heal discipline problems from the inside, out. In the words of Jack Frymier, "Our hidden ultimatum is to either take freedom away from our kids or teach our kids how to use their freedoms wisely and well."

Unless we are willing to spend more time enforcing more rules, unless we are willing to let education continue to be the only profession which demands the right to beat its clients, unless we are willing to let our middle schools become corrective institutions where adults spend time patrolling rather than educating, then our middle schools will have to become places where students want to be self-disciplined and responsible because they care about their school, their teachers and peers, and themselves. The goal of better discipline ought to be redefined as the goal of promoting human involvement if we are to achieve the vision of a 2001.

As a start, we might acknowledge what's at the heart of Terry Borton's book, Reach, Touch and Teach, because before we can teach kids, we have to find ways to reach them and touch them and before we can do that we will have to build schools which nurture closeness. As two recent extensive studies so accurately suggest, "our schools might best try to become warm and friendly places committed in organization and practice to establishing stronger ties between teachers and kids". Indeed, connecting teachers and students in smaller, more personal communities for learning and establishing workable small group guidance programs can transform anonymous middle school populations where no one cares, into closely connected and caring communities. In a step beyond closeness, I would like for you to consider what I believe to be a key ingredient in promoting human involvement--multiage grouping.

In a country where over 40,000,000 Americans move every two years and the average duration of any interpersonal relationship is less today than ever before, long-lasting, continuing relationships are a rare and highly valued commodity. In middle schools with multiage grouping, where students and teachers can stay together for 3-4 years, learning and growing, discipline problems are less severe, vandalism declines but most important, strong roots are established for our kids who are struggling to be someone, somewhere. For the middle school of 2001, we must build into our programs not only the opportunity for closeness, but the time needed in establishing lasting and supportive relationships.

My own personal agenda for the future of the middle school includes as a high priority what I choose to call life-related learning. It is rooted in my personal conviction that what our kids think about in our classrooms and what they do in our schools is a life and death concern. As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead proclaimed, "What they think about is of real importance for it is during adolescence the lines of character are engraved". If we hope to build character and save lives in our schools, we must look thoughtfully at what we are teaching our kids. The middle school must confront the age-old educational dream of relevance or it will continue to haunt us.

In our present day world, knowledge is growing at a phenomenal rate. From the time a child is born today and graduates from college, the amount of knowledge in the world will be four times as great. Like knowledge, values are changing faster now than ever before in history. For our adolescents, there is no guarantee that the values affirmed today will be the values of tomorrow. On the outside as well as on the inside, change is with our children.

Accordingly, from this day forward, we must concern ourselves far more with the process of learning, for today's knowledge will inevitably become tomorrow's misinformation and learning how to learn will have to take precedence if our children are to meet the challenge of a future shock. In the years ahead we must work harder to weave together the academics so that learning moves beyond the titles of subjects or pages of the textbook, and into the realm of learning to last a lifetime.

What we teach in our middle schools should be intimately related to adolescent growth in contemporary society. The one million unwed, teenage mothers in this country should convince us that now is the time for serious sex education. The prediction that our youngsters will have increasing difficulty choosing careers and that they are expected to change careers four times in their adult lives, demands that career education be radically more than a series of job descriptions. As the American family struggles to adapt and survive, "Marriage and the Family" should no longer be a course of study reserved for high school seniors. And with the growing no-faulty morality we see, the middle school of tomorrow must encourage moral development.

I believe we are equipped to revitalize the middle school curriculum so that what we teach will find a way into the lives of our children.

Last year, I had a brand new team of students and I wanted to survey their interests before planning instruction. After I had enthusiastically distributed the forms, Greg, one of my promising 8th graders, asked, "Mrs. Doda, why is it everyone asks us what we'd like to learn and what we'd like to do, but then they never do anything about it? Will what we say really make a difference?"

As we face a future of looming world problems and the task of preserving a free democracy, the members of our middle schools, both child and adult, must live democratically. If we plan for Greg to take hold of his life, making responsible choices and participating actively in society now and in the future, simply asking will not be enough. As Nat Hentoff explained, ". . . The spirits of many of our children will continue to be mutilated no matter how many innovations are introduced until each school with or without walls is . . . a democratic community in which everyone involved shares in the rights, responsibilities and governance."

The middle school I hope for will be courageous enough to stop telling Greg what to do and what not to do and begin to find ways to make him his very own best resource. As William Glasser and Lawrence Kohlberg have both solemnly advised, to teach responsibility and encourage

moral growth, we must provide authentic avenues for student autonomy and responsibility: not only in erasing the blackboard or in watering the plants but in planning some of what they learn, how they learn, in helping to run the school, in sharing ideas with peers and in sitting at the same table with teachers in shared decision making and democratic problem solving. If we strive to build democratic middle schools, our youngsters may strive to uphold the ideas upon which this nation was founded. If we fail, then they may submit to a future of 1984.

Though our middle schools are created for the welfare of our children, my final priority for the future is meant for those very special people who are the architects and builders of tomorrow's schools. My message goes out to you because I believe that our schools will not be humane places for children unless they are humane places for the teachers and administrators as well.

With the challenge of improving skills without mutilating minds and spirits, with the challenge of maintaining discipline without neglecting basic human rights, with the challenge of teaching relevant curriculum, without failing to achieve accountability, and with the challenge of teaching today's transescents without burning out, the teachers and administrators in our middle schools must join hands in their struggle to survive and prevail.

Teachers, to be the committed professionals we desperately need, must believe that they contribute to the shape of their schools outside the walls of the classroom. With meaningful school rights, responsibilities and effective teacher-leadership, I would wager that more teachers in more middle schools would be newly inspired and deeply committed to the task of teaching transescents. When teachers are organized in interdisciplinary teams with the designated responsibility to make decisions concerning student scheduling, budgeting of materials, or the use of their instructional time and resources, cooperation begins to grow and democracy to flourish.

For the middle school of 2001, administrators and teachers must sit down together face to face, committed to sharing needs and concerns and resolving problems so that what we do in our schools we do together, demonstrating to our kids just how it can be done.

IV. CLOSING

The middle school we have today, we made. It has ambition and purpose, commitment and credibility and tremendous power and promise. For many of America's adolescents struggling in the dark, it has been the first flicker of light. For many of us, it has become a lighthouse in American education.

But now is a time for testing - Testing whether or not we can uphold what we know to be right and true; testing whether or not we can match our words with our deeds and our actions with our answers; and testing in the end, our courage to build the middle school we need to turn away from 1984 and ^{move} forward to a 2001.

Will the middle school be steadfast in its commitment to the life and growth of our children? Will the middle school of today be a promise of a life worth living tomorrow? I hope so. Goethe once said, "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it".

1984 or 2001? The challenge surrounds us. Genius and power are with us. Let's be bold! Let's begin!